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THE ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION

AND THE FILM

Joan Ogden

(Office of Publications)

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Motion pictures are today accepted as either a valuable expression of man's creative impulse, or (not exclusively) as an important tool for mass communication. This attitude is now deeply implanted and unhesitatingly accepted as "correct" by the literate majority; such an appreciation is, however, of extremely recent origin - much more recent than the birth of the cinema industry itself. In the United States, the concept of film as an art form grew substantially from the efforts of one institution, the Museum of Modern Art, in whose activities The Rockefeller Foundation was a prominent partner. The Foundation and the General Education Board also were primary sources of aid to several groups - notably, the American Council on Education - which helped develop films as instruments of classroom instruction and of education in a broader public sense.

These inquiries into film, both as a subject of aesthetic interest and as an object of utility, had their beginnings in the 1930's, and their nature and fortunes are briefly described in the following report.



## The Film as Art

In 1935 the motion picture, then the world's newest form of art, was already forty years old. Forty years of cinema and only the last two or three of them could be studied or enjoyed! With a public apparently insatiable for the latest Hollywood offering, the studios quickly relegated last year's movies to limbo. Prints were destroyed and negatives placed in storage. It was almost impossible, even for serious students or scholars, to see any important American films made before 1932, such as the great Chaplin comedies, the work of pioneer D. W. Griffith, or the outstanding dramas of King Vidor. Classics from the golden ages of the German, Russian, Italian, French, English, and Swedish film studios were also largely unobtainable.

Imagine the situation if, from the world's store of literature, only novels of the past few years could be read. No Austen, Dickens, Hardy, Stendahl, Balzac, Goethe, Hawthorne, Melville, Dostoevski . . . the list could be continued. The public would have very little basis on which to distinguish good novels from bad, writers would have no heritage on which to draw, and no serious study of the novel form or of its history could be attempted.

It was also largely impossible to see films, whether contemporary or not, that by their nature or subject matter were thought to be unsuited for entertaining a mass audience. These were films that sought to evoke serious thought or to stretch the imagination of their viewers, such as the avant-garde experiments with the moving image and the subconscious symbol, of

which a sizable number were made in Europe in the twenties. Others, made by Europeans, the British, and by one American, Robert Flaherty, used the camera to document reality or to explore social issues.

From time to time aficionados in some of the larger cities in the United States formed film societies for viewing bygone masterpieces, but these groups usually failed after a season or two because they could not get the films. It simply did not pay a commercial producer to resurrect an American film for a single booking. The societies could secure foreign films, though importation for one or two showings was extremely expensive. The fact that the film societies saw foreign films almost to the exclusion of American classics probably reinforced the inferiority complex that Americans nurture about their own culture. Actually, many of the best European films were strongly influenced by, if they did not borrow heavily from, American productions of the early years of the century.

Even with such woefully inadequate materials, a few colleges and universities did give courses in motion picture "appreciation," but only one fully accredited academic course on motion pictures was offered in the entire United States (at the University of Southern California). Contributing to the neglect was the attitude of many intellectuals that cinema was a sordidly profitable surrogate for the theater. Seventy million Americans out of some 125 million went to the movies each week. How could films be art? The cinema, the most popular art form ever created, was the victim of its own popularity.

In the meanwhile, a time bomb ticked toward explosion. All films until about 1950, consisted of an emulsion on a nitrate celluloid base. Cellulose nitrate is an extremely unstable substance. Although the process of its



decay can be inhibited by storage at cool temperature and low humidity, no power can forever arrest the disintegration of nitrate film. Within ten to forty years it begins to go - at first as a gluey liquid oozing between the layers of the reel. In the final stage all that remains is a clump of highly inflammable yellow dust - guncotton. In warehouses and cellars in 1935 hundreds of irreplaceable films slowly disintegrated, threatening to take others with them into fiery oblivion.

How quickly nitrate film decomposes depends partly on the care with which it was originally developed. Fortunately, some of the earliest films had received better treatment in processing than those made subsequently. But prior to 1918 not even negatives were systematically stored away. To this period belongs the work of primitives and pioneers like Griffith, Georges Méliès, Mack Sennett, Edwin S. Porter, and Thomas H. Ince - men who were largely responsible for developing the cinematic devices of narration and characterization. In 1935 their films lay unremembered in cellars, attics, and closets. Also scattered or lost or gathering dust were their personal papers, "stills," and reviews and other clippings from contemporary newspapers and magazines - items that would be of inestimable value to historians of film and of twentieth century culture.

The Library of Congress had made one ludicrous effort to preserve films. When in the 1890's motion pictures were first submitted for copyright registration, the law applied only to material printed on paper. Thousands of films were therefore rephotographed on paper strips and deposited with the library as a series of photographs. They could be seen as motion pictures only by printing them again as film transparencies. In 1912 the copyright laws were changed to permit registration and deposition of motion pictures

but, lacking storage facilities for the highly inflammable nitrate films, the library decided to accept "descriptions" of motion pictures instead. Thus, in 1935 it had been 22 years since a motion picture had been deposited in the library, even as a paper strip facsimile.

Abroad, national archives and institutes for films existed in Great Britain, France, Japan, Austria, Italy, Germany, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, the Netherlands, Poland, and the Soviet Union. Most of them, however, were primarily interested in the teaching film in their own countries, and only secondarily in cultural and aesthetic aspects of the cinema. None of them had come to grips with the necessity of preserving films no longer current or of assuring their circulation.

That the situation is very different today is due in large part to a single institution, the Museum of Modern Art.

In 1935 the Museum of Modern Art approached The Rockefeller Foundation with a plan to set up a film library. Its purpose was to be to collect and preserve, on a continuing basis, films historically and aesthetically important to the development of the art, and to offer them for rental to film societies and others. An initial Foundation grant of \$500 enabled the museum to query a representative group of institutions as to whether they would subscribe to films circulated by the museum. With enthusiastic replies from a number of colleges and universities, the museum asked for and received a \$120,000 grant to set up the nation's first film library.

Over the years from 1935 to 1954, the Foundation appropriated a total of \$338,730 for the library - not an especially impressive sum, but one that had a tremendous effect.



The moving force behind the film library was British-born Iris Barry, a founder of the British Film Institute and author of one of the first books about film as a popular art, Let's Go to the Movies (1926). Her earlier efforts to establish a New York Film Society had failed for the same reasons that plagued the film society movement generally.

With her husband, John Abbott, executive vice-president of the museum, who was named director of the new film library, Miss Barry traveled across Europe searching out pictures and making agreements with film institutes for acquiring foreign motion pictures on a continuing basis. Negotiations with Hollywood producers, who feared infringement of their pictures' commercial value, were somewhat more difficult. (The first real crack in Hollywood's armor, so the story goes, came when a sympathetic Mary Pickford invited the movie moguls to her home for an evening's showing of excerpts from all but forgotten cinematic classics.) By 1936, however, agreements were signed whereby the films would remain in the possession of the studios but the film library could, at its own expense, order prints from the negatives for showing at the museum and at other educational institutions.

Of the earliest films, two million feet of the product of the Edison Company were acquired from its successors, and another two million from the American Biograph and Mutoscope Company, for which D. W. Griffith did his early work. Individual films were tracked down in many odd places. The Edison Company's Execution of Mary Queen of Scots, one of the first films ever made (1895), was found in a garbage can, spotted with tobacco juice. But by 1940 the museum had acquired a representative portion of the world's motion picture masterpieces - some 15 million feet of film.

Along with its films the library began to collect books, periodicals, and newsclippings, and to gather scenarios, posters, and stills. It

restored some of the badly damaged films it had received, and made duplicate negatives of those it planned to circulate. If musical scores for silent films were missing, new ones were prepared, as well as program notes and, for foreign films, English subtitles.

Within the first year of operation over a hundred institutions subscribed to one or more of the film library's programs. Probably few of them offered degree courses or represented full-season film societies, but it was an impressive start. Iris Barry and John Abbott organized the first course in the film at Columbia University and for a few years taught it themselves with the help of guest lecturers, mostly movie makers from here and abroad.

In its initial exhibitions the film library concentrated on bringing to the screen as many long-unseen films as possible. These surveys of world cinema traced the international development of the art as well as the history of national cinemas, and included avant-garde and documentary films making their first appearance on American screens. In 1937 the documentary was given special attention when Paul Rotha, one of Britain's outstanding documentary makers and the author of a book on the genre, came to the United States under museum and Rockefeller Foundation auspices to lecture and show a representative group of films.

The early years of the film library, during which it acquired its greatest quantities of films, coincided with the gathering of war clouds in Europe. Since Miss Barry had lived in Europe for many years, she was more aware than many Americans that the conflict was coming. She was also aware of what propaganda films could reveal about the mind of an enemy. On her collecting trips to Europe for the film library in the late thirties, she made a particular effort to interest propaganda minister Goebbels and other officials of the Hitler



regime, and managed to come away with the cream of the Nazi films. So successful was her pose, incidentally, that on the eve of America's entry into the war she was denounced for her activities by the Anti-Fascist League of New York. With the subsequent loan of captured Nazi film from the Canadian Government, the museum came into possession of a sizable store of information of great value to the war effort.

The task of analyzing this German material fell to a refugee from the Nazis, Dr. Siegfried Kracauer, who joined the museum's staff not long after the war began. A scholar as well as former film critic for the Frankfurter Zeitung in his native Germany, Dr. Kracauer had been rescued from Europe through the good offices of the American Friends, with payment of ransom - so I was told - by The Rockefeller Foundation. The confidential document he produced from this study of the German films was used by the Office of Strategic Services, the United States Army and Naval Intelligence Branches, and others engaged in counter-propaganda.

Supported by a special Foundation grant, Dr. Kracauer later incorporated the study in a history, From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological Study of the German Film (1947). With this and subsequent publications, he has achieved a reputation as one of the world's most significant critics of the motion picture. His monumental Theory of Film (1950), was called by a reviewer "the most important work ever to appear in English on the theory and aesthetics of film."

The museum, the Friends, and the Foundation also had roles, I have been told, in the escape from wartime France of Jean Benoit-Levy,\* the documentary

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\* Recipient of a Foundation grant in aid in 1950.

maker who later headed the United Nations film unit, and of Jean Renoir, who tried working in Hollywood for a time. Another such refugee was Arthur Kleiner, the film library's pianist for silent pictures, who has now been on the staff for more than two decades. Mr. Kleiner is perhaps the library's best known member, because of his frequent appearances on television as accompanist for silent films.

One museum activity of the war years was not quite so fortunate in its results. In the early forties Iris Barry worked out a program for the selection and acquisition of films by the Library of Congress with Librarian Archibald MacLeish. She hoped that the Congress would provide funds for the preservation of films which, although not specially significant in the development of the film form itself, were nevertheless important as historical documents. The Foundation made grants totaling \$65,000 to the Library of Congress for this project. Included in the final report was the proposal that works be selected by a committee that would decide on their importance. By the time the report was submitted, MacLeish was no longer librarian. His successor turned down the proposal on the grounds, which seem quite reasonable, that the federal government should take responsibility for preserving all motion pictures. As the museum's present curator tells it, a request was made to Congress for funds "equal to several times the national debt," to enable the Library of Congress to acquire and store every film ever made. The lawmakers promptly and horrifiedly rejected it.

The end of the war was the beginning of a crisis for the Museum of Modern Art film library. If the library had been in possession of unlimited funds, it might have made duplicate negatives of each film as



acquired, a process that would, of course, need to be repeated in time. With its limited means, it had decided instead to acquire as many films as possible and to watch them carefully for signs of decay.

After the war a number of the films in the museum's collection began to go; what had been an emergency came to be a steady state of affairs. For a second time it seemed that a large portion of our film heritage was to be lost. Then in 1952 triacetate cellulose was invented. Film stock of this substance will last as long as the finest paper, or approximately 400 years, and is not flammable. The film library appealed for contributions to a film preservation fund so that its most important films could be transferred immediately to triacetate stock. In the initial drive, over \$52,000 was raised through contributions from the motion picture industry, wealthy friends of the museum, a Thursday Evening Film Series benefit, and a \$25,000 grant from The Rockefeller Foundation. This grant was the last of the \$338,730 which the Foundation appropriated specifically for the film library.

In the years since the Museum of Modern Art film library was founded, its influence has spread in ever-widening circles across the surface of American culture. Today the aesthetics and history of the motion picture are taught in some 75 colleges and universities throughout the country, often along with courses in production. At least a dozen universities offer a curriculum leading to the M.A. or Ph.D. Professor Erik Barnouw, who directs Columbia University's Center for Mass Communications, told me that he was "absolutely amazed at the zealous interest in film" of the center's students, especially during the past five to ten years. In addition, the cinema is the object of informal study in some 450 film societies, many the joint effort of a university and a museum. A critic estimates that a good 80 percent of

these classes and informal groups owe their origin and continuation to the film library's circulation program.

In the classrooms and film society auditoriums many people saw for the first time the old pre-World War II avant-garde films that experiment with abstract form or with the creation of symbols of the unconscious. The vital and determined new generation of experimentalists was profoundly influenced by this exposure and in turn has found in the film societies an audience for their own work. In his book, Experiment in the Film, Lewis Jacobs attributes the "phenomenal postwar revival" of interest in the film to two forces that had been set in motion during the war years. "The first was the circulation at nominal cost to nonprofit groups of programs from the Film Library of the Museum of Modern Art. Their collection of pictures and program notes dealing with the history, art, and traditions of cinema went to hundreds of colleges, universities, museums, film appreciation groups, study groups. These widespread exhibitions as well as the Museum of Modern Art's own showings in their auditorium in New York City exerted a major influence in preparing the way for a broader appreciation and production of experimental films."

That a new audience has been created is amply confirmed by the spectacular rise of the commercial "art" houses, which provide their patrons with a steady diet of motion picture classics and the newer foreign films, together with documentary and experimental shorts. As late as 1946 there were barely a dozen art houses in the entire country, half of them in New York City; today there are over 450, and many more show an occasional outstanding foreign film. New York has a number of theaters that show nothing but revivals.

One reason, of course, for this increase in art houses is that the American public's level of sophistication and interest in things foreign



has risen. Another is the 1948 decision of the Supreme Court which broke the control of the big Hollywood producers over distribution and led them, in the face of increasing competition from television, to make fewer films. To remedy the deficit, many theater owners turned to foreign films booked through independent distributors.

The popularity and commercial success of the cultural cinema, however, have an ironic side for the Museum of Modern Art. The trail it blazed is now a well-traveled avenue, and in recent years the film library has found itself in danger of being swept off the road.

The first blow came in the mid-fifties when the museum's circulation to film societies and educational institutions, no longer held in check by the war, suddenly began to zoom. Small commercial distributors of 16mm films, who twenty years earlier would not have touched a film more than two years old, saw what looked like a lucrative market. They began to buy up the American rights to European films and films made in the United States by independent producers, and to require the museum to withdraw its prints from circulation. In some cases these distributors were willing to allow the museum to continue circulation - providing it charged the commercial rate, approximately three times its own. As a nonprofit institution, the museum could not have done this even if it had wanted to.

Hollywood producers, following suit, set up departments to distribute 16mm prints of their films, and promptly rescinded permission for the museum to circulate all or some of their pictures. More serious inroads were made by the en bloc sale of pre-1948 movies to television. Again the museum could not circulate prints of these films - at least while negotiations were under way.

The museum could derive a measure of comfort from the fact that some of the films not commercially attractive were nevertheless of great importance in the history of the motion picture. But others essential to an understanding of the development of the art - like von Stroheim's Greed, King Vidor's The Big Parade and Hallelujah, Garbo's Camille and Anna Christie - were no longer available to colleges and universities for instructional purposes.

The museum's circulation revenue dropped abruptly from \$50,000 to \$32,000 a year. Only showings in its own auditorium were left unaffected.

Television's threat has now lessened, fortunately. A number of the major studios eventually sold their films outright so that, in effect, anyone could purchase a print and show or distribute it. Agreements reached with some of the new owners are similar to those made with the motion picture industry, allowing the museum to show films for educational purposes while television agencies retain commercial rights.

In all likelihood, however, the museum's volume of circulation will continue to be limited. Over and over again in college towns across the country a story is repeating itself. A film society is formed within the college and is quickly subscribed to capacity. It attracts the attention of the college bureau that books lectures, traveling shows, and other entertainment. Soon the society's films are being shown to a large audience in the college auditorium. Business at the local movie theater suffers and the owner complains. Eventually an accommodation is reached whereby the college bureau shows its films at the commercial house on an off-night and the two share in the take. The theater has become a quasi-art house. Of course, these films must be procured from commercial distributors. "This hurts us," I was told by Richard Griffith, the film library's present curator, "but we have



to say that this is what we hoped would happen. More and more our circulation will depend on films borrowed for instruction in the art of the motion picture within colleges and universities."

Griffith, who is one of the country's foremost film scholars, came to the museum in 1937 as a Rockefeller Foundation fellow in film to assist Paul Rotha in the research on a revised edition of The Film Till Now; subsequently he worked with Rotha on another classic, Documentary Film. Endowed with a special gift for stories about the flamboyant personalities of the movie world, Griffith tells one on himself concerning his pre-fellowship interview with John Marshall and David Stevens, then director for Humanities. Why do you want a fellowship, he was asked. "So I can go to Hollywood and make pictures." He has always been grateful for John Marshall's reply: "Young man, we'll forget you ever made that statement. Now here's your fellowship."

Griffith worked under Iris Barry for more than ten years and succeeded her when she retired as curator in 1951. He is the author of a biography of D. W. Griffith as well as of many monographs and articles on individual films and film makers, and has also collaborated with Arthur Mayer on The Movies in America. He serves on a number of film juries. Through his activities, above all through his choice of films for exhibition or permanent acquisition by the museum, he exerts a decisive influence on serious film taste in this country. Under his leadership, the film library has continued to enjoy the good will of the movie industry, without which it would never have come into existence and upon which it will always be dependent.

"In my opinion," says David O. Selznick, "a great debt is owed to the Film Library of the Museum of Modern Art by all members of the motion picture industry, film creators throughout the world, and all those interested in the

development of cinema as an art form. Without the splendid work done by the Library, and its extraordinarily able and devoted curator, Richard Griffith, a large number of the great films of the past would even today be unavailable for viewing and for study. In other fields there are many museums; for films, there is only the Film Library." Director Fred Zinneman, whose films include High Noon and Member of the Wedding, calls the museum "the most important and best organized archive in this country of great motion pictures, old and new. . . . It is indispensable as an institution devoted to the study of the art and history of motion pictures."<sup>1</sup>

The importance of the film library's service to the scholar is certainly beyond question. Each year from 10 to 12 undergraduate and graduate theses in the field of film are written with extensive help from Mr. Griffith's assistant, Eileen Bowser, who came to the museum as his secretary ten years ago and is now, in his judgment, one of the world's leading authorities on the primitive (pre-1915) film. Mrs. Bowser answers at least three or four requests a day from scholars or the general public on some aspect of film history, past or current.

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the country does have two other museums devoted to film. The George Eastman House of Photography, in Rochester, New York, was founded in 1948 with an initial 880 titles from a private collector in Cleveland, James Card, who became the curator. In building this collection Mr. Card's policy has been to supplement rather than repeat the Modern Art collection. The Eastman archive makes its films available for viewing to accredited scholars without charge, but does not circulate them.

The second, the newly established Hollywood Museum, opens its doors to both scholars and the general public. Its director is Arthur Knight, formerly film librarian under Iris Barry at the Modern Art.

There is also the film archive set up by the Library of Congress in the late 1940's. It now consists of a huge (70 million feet) but by no means complete collection of motion pictures bearing U.S. copyrights that have been made since 1942, plus films from the period 1912-1942 acquired through gift or purchase of four private collections. This archive is a depository only.



Virtually any serious study of the film that covers much ground must draw extensively on the museum's resources. Edward Wagenknecht's The Movies in the Age of Innocence, Arthur Knight's The Liveliest Art, Bosley Crowther's history of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, The Lion's Share, and Siegfried Kracauer's Theory of Film are among recent books that depended heavily on the museum's source materials.

The film library is in constant demand by members of the television and motion picture industries, who use its collection for ideas, techniques, and, in the case of television, actual footage from old films for incorporation in TV documentaries. While the library cannot, of course, grant the television producer permission to use the film, it can help him decide what footage to purchase from the commercial owner by screening prints for him. It has also helped documentary producers locate rare footage; in this connection, Iris Barry, who became the film library's European representative after her retirement, has rendered great service.

But perhaps the most important role of all for the film library today is to lend the prestige of the Museum of Modern Art - the Establishment in contemporary visual arts - to those films that it decides are worthy of acquisition. The library follows a policy of "giving priority to films which, by general agreement, are of the highest importance and merit, while collecting when possible films which by their success - or failure - have had profound impact on the history of motion pictures, and films which, by reason of their social or cultural influence, have attained significance." There is always room for error, but it is essential that judgments be made, and that they be made on the basis of considerable scholarship rather than first impressions and subjective reactions, as is often true in the daily press. (It has been

a source of somewhat wry satisfaction to the museum that, as part of the ballyhoo attending the release of Cleopatra, a publicity man thought it useful to furnish the newspapers with the story that the museum had added some 3,000 stills of the motion picture to its collection. What his account neglected to add was that the museum, as a matter of keeping a historical record, accepts stills of all motion pictures, regardless of merit.)

Critical standards also govern the film library's exhibition policy. The early surveys of world cinema have now given way to retrospectives that focus on a genre, a screen personality, the work of an individual director, or the achievements of a national cinema. In 1946 a six-month survey of the documentary film, 1922-1945, paid tribute to the great output of the World War II years; in the spring of 1963 a television retrospective signaled the coming of age of this extraordinary new medium. Gene Kelly, Marlene Dietrich, and Alfred Hitchcock are among those whose pictures have been re-viewed. Through the museum's survey of "The Post-War Polish Film," a number of motion pictures from that Iron Curtain country were introduced to the United States for the first time. Their popularity at the museum convinced the commercial distributors that they might take a chance on some of them, and as a result, Ashes and Diamonds and several others made the art houses and achieved critical acclaim here.

Money is the ingredient in much that is problematic about the future of the film library. Film imposes tremendous custodial burdens. Some years ago the library had to return ten million feet of the Pathé Newsreel, 1910 to 1940, because after six years it could no longer afford to store the film, let alone duplicate it for exhibition purposes.

Of the museum's 12 million feet of film, approximately half is still on nitrate stock. Vault attendants spend their entire time in inspecting cans



of film, one after the other; when the last reel has been seen, they begin again at the first. Each time a nitrate film must be transferred to acetate, the film library must dip into its budget for acquisitions. To transfer one average-length film to safety stock costs about \$1,200, or about 80 percent of the funds available annually for new acquisitions.

Other limitations on the film library will be greatly alleviated now that the new addition to the museum has been completed - with the assistance of a 1962 Rockefeller Foundation grant of \$1.5 million. Collections of documents, formerly in storerooms - some not completely catalogued because of a shortage of staff and space - will soon become fully available for the first time to scholars, students, and members of the motion picture and television industries.

Formerly there was only one projection room for both library staff and visitors, and it requires the services of a professional projectionist. Because of the expense of using it, scholars usually had to obtain foundation grants to screen any quantity of films. The new facilities include a large study room for researchers, with 35mm movie viewer machines and Moviolas for 16mm films.

After it has settled down in its new quarters, perhaps the film library will be able to catch its breath long enough to reply to the suggestion of avant-garde critic Gregory Markoupolis in a recent issue of Film Comment. Markoupolis urged that the library now become a National Institute of Film, serving as a center for the circulation, study, and production of films, and in the bargain, publish its own film magazine!

II

The Nontheatrical Film

In the form of travelogues and newsreels, motion pictures were used to inform almost as early as they were used to entertain. But it was not till the thirties that any great number of people woke up to realize that the film might also be one of the most effective media ever to come into the possession of educators and social commentators. Here was a medium of communication, now quite sophisticated technically, that could present information and explore basic questions of existence both vividly and dramatically.

A major impetus to the use of the motion picture as a tool of education was undoubtedly the "general education" movement of the thirties. In its simplest essence, this term signified education of the great masses of people for life in a democracy, as distinct from the transmission of tradition to a small elite. By stimulating a search for new teaching methods, the movement inevitably gave rise to experimentation with the motion picture.

Beginning in 1935, the General Education Board, a strong supporter of the movement, invested a series of grants in four projects concerned with the use of the motion picture in schools and colleges. To the American Council on Education, an organization of education associations, school systems, and public libraries, the Board gave close to \$200,000 for a study of how motion pictures might be most effectively used in the classroom. On the theory that a knowledge of "audience response" would help educators know better what they wanted from producers who wished to make films for the schools, the council sponsored a score of publications based on the experiences of hundreds of teachers and



their pupils. The Progressive Education Association, whose Commission on Human Relations received over \$167,000 between 1936 and 1939, sought to adapt and distribute Hollywood films to the schools for teaching children about social and interpersonal relations. Standard entertainment fare - screen biographies and dramas - were edited for situations of frustration, conflict, and decision to serve as a basis for classroom discussions. The project seems to have been highly effective in making children aware of the "many, many ways people live their lives."

It soon became clear that the chief problems were producing good instructional films and getting them to the schools. The two were - and are - interdependent. Obviously producers would not spend money to make good films if the films were not going to reach an audience large enough to pay for the operation. On the other hand, the creation of an effective and extensive system of distribution depended on the availability of quantities of good films.

In 1938, therefore, the General Education Board helped the American Council on Education establish the Association of School Film Libraries, Inc.; the aim was to bring together the hundred-odd agencies distributing films to the schools in a central authority that would inform the schools about what films were available and would also evaluate them. Between 1938 and 1941 the association received over \$47,000 in grants from the GEB. As for the problem of producing good instructional films, it seemed that an educational institution itself, with no need to make a profit, might be the answer. The institution selected was the University of Minnesota, which between 1937 and 1941 received over \$134,000 from the GEB for development of a production center.

For a variety of reasons the Association of School Film Libraries failed to become self-supporting, and when the Board decided against further subsidy,

it ceased operations. The center at Minnesota is still active, and many of its graduates have gone on to work professionally in film.

The documentary film received its chief impetus from another source. Both here and in England, the impetus was the desire to explore the great social issues of poverty, mechanization, and urbanization that came to the fore during the Depression. Men and women who might have been journalists in an earlier time were strongly attracted to what appeared to be the most persuasive medium of communication ever invented. The earliest American masterpieces of this genre were produced by Pare Lorentz for the Resettlement Administration of the New Deal: The Plow That Broke the Plains, about soil conservation in the Dust Bowl, and The River, about flood control on the Mississippi. Willard Van Dyke, who made Harvest and Rice for the Foundation, got his start in documentaries as cameraman for The River.

According to film historian Arthur Knight (The Liveliest Art), the event that really provided the turning point for the documentary in America was the New York World's Fair of 1939-1940, where a great many sales films, travelogues, art films, and a number of true documentaries were shown, among them Lorentz's two early masterpieces. The biggest hit of the fair proved to be a film made especially for it by Willard Van Dyke and Ralph Steiner, who had recently formed American Documentary Films, Inc. This was The City, a film about city planning, sponsored by the American Institute of Planners with the help of a Carnegie Corporation grant.

The great interest in the documentary that the World's Fair generated among both sponsors and the public suggested that the time was ripe for an American counterpart of the British Film Centre, a group formed by England's leading documentary makers to develop sponsorship for their films. The



British center's products had first become known in this country through the circulation and exhibition programs of the Museum of Modern Art film library and the visit of Paul Rotha, one of the outstanding members of the center. The British film makers had been extraordinarily successful in persuading both government and industry to sponsor a number of brilliant films on such subjects as slum housing, nutrition, communications, and farmers' cooperatives - all with complete freedom for the film maker to report what he saw and heard.

The American Film Center came into existence in August, 1938, through a small exploratory grant from The Rockefeller Foundation of \$1,500. It would become the Foundation's major interest in the educational and documentary film field.<sup>2</sup> Its director was Donald Slesinger, who resigned as head of the Department of Education of the World's Fair to take the job. A former dean of social sciences at the University of Chicago, he had more recently been a member of a public relations firm handling the fair and had also served for a time on the board of directors of American Documentary Films, Inc.,

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<sup>2</sup> There were also a few grants to other institutions in the thirties and forties. The National Film Society of Canada received almost \$50,000, and the New School for Social Research, New York University, the New York Zoological Society, the University of Manchester (England), the School of Design in Chicago, and Yale University all received small grants to experiment with the use of film in such fields as economic research, zoology and allied sciences, mass communications studies, drama, and design. Even the ill-fated China Program of the thirties included several exploratory grants to Chinese universities in educational film.

Through other small Foundation grants, the effect of the motion picture on American life was subjected to scrutiny by a British anthropologist, Geoffrey Gorer, and by Leo Rosten, a writer of many talents both as novelist and as social commentator. Rosten analyzed Hollywood, where he saw the aberrations of American society writ large, with such imagination, insight, and charity that he pleased both the movie colony and the critics, who called his book the best ever written on the subject (Hollywood - The Movie Colony: The Movie Makers, 1941).

(The City). His second-in-command was Alice V. Keliher, head of the Progressive Education Association's Commission on Human Relations, which held the GEB grant. The board of the film center was made up of distinguished educators and administrators, including Dr. Luther Gulick of the Institute of Public Administration and Dr. Kenneth D. Widdemer of the New York State Department of Health.

The center got under way in 1939 with its first Rockefeller Foundation grant for general support, \$60,000, and a commission for a series of films on public health for the New York City Board of Health. Within a year it had planned a film on higher education for women for an alumnae committee of the big seven women's colleges in the East; edited for the U.S. Department of Agriculture for use in the schools a series of demonstration films originally made for a farm audience; planned a film series for the in-service training of housing management staff for the National Association of Housing Officials; and was in the process of providing similar services to the Progressive Education Association, the Greater New York Fund, the United States Children's Bureau, the State of Missouri Conservation Commission, and the Bureau of the Census.

Composed not of film makers but of educators with a knowledge of film, the American Film Center was intended to provide "advisory and supervisory service in the production and distribution of educational films to agencies wishing to produce and distribute such films." It could tell agencies how much a certain picture might cost, make suggestions about its content and form, recommend a producing unit, write or review scripts, edit footage, advise on distribution - any or all of these things; but it was not to become involved itself in actual production. On the other hand, a film maker who



wanted to find a sponsor might come for help to the film center, which supposedly would be well fitted to mediate between the two and interpret both the requirements of the sponsor and the problems of the film maker.

Initially it had been agreed that the Association of Documentary Film Producers, which included most of the outstanding documentary makers in America, would recommend to the film center which member of its group would be best qualified to work on a specific film. For about a year this arrangement worked well enough. Then, in the case of a motion picture on Negro education, to be made with GEB funds, Slesinger summarily turned down the association's recommendation, claiming that the man was a communist. In the open and bitter fight that developed, the center became permanently cut off from most of the good makers of documentary films.

The center thereupon began to expand into other areas. It sought to become a general clearinghouse of information on the documentary, and published in addition a newsletter for the field, Film News. It also set up a division of research to study the potential nontheatrical audience and to undertake content analysis of educational and documentary motion pictures. Finally, it tackled the impossibly thorny problem of distributing such pictures. Since many years might elapse before theater owners could be convinced that people would pay to see educational films, the center conceived an ambitious scheme for lending films, together with a projector and the services of a projectionist, to women's clubs, fraternal organizations, religious societies, museums, public libraries, schools, colleges, even industries and advertising agencies. This plan was on limited trial in 1941, when with the outbreak of war the manufacture of projectors for civilian use was drastically curtailed.

World War II brought about a great boom for the documentary film. Documentaries were needed for training and indoctrinating the armed forces and for building morale at home. Many excellent motion pictures were actually made within the armed forces, which trained men especially for this purpose. The American Film Center found itself called upon to perform a variety of advisory and supervisory services for the Civil Service Commission, the Office of Civilian Defense, the Office of Facts and Figures, the Bureau of the Budget, and the Federal Security Agency. Although the center might have used the influence acquired through these activities to achieve a larger measure of financial independence - The Rockefeller Foundation was still providing almost its entire budget - it either could not or would not ask for more than travel and per diem expenses.

Instead, it made the dubious decision to turn producer itself. With the Federal Security Agency as distributor and the Swift meat packing company as sponsor, the center produced in Hollywood a film on nutrition, entitled Hidden Hunger. This was followed by a second for the same company, Red Wagon. The first apparently emphasized the value of eating a certain quantity of meat each day; the center had planned the film in consultation with nutrition experts and then sold the idea to Swift. The second, however, was a rather partisan biography of the founder of the Swift company, and was largely the latter's idea.

The Swift company was pleased with these films and paid well for them. With government backing, Hidden Hunger reached commercial theaters and was favorably received. But the affair put the film center in danger of compromising its position. Could it claim to set standards for makers of educational films in its advisory and supervisory role, while at the same time competing with them as producer?



To resolve this duality, the center organized a separate corporation, Film Consultants, Inc., which was to handle production of all films that originated from the center and with its income help to underwrite the non-profit-making activities of the center. The time, however, was 1945. The war was ending and government film production was slackening. No more commercial sponsors stepped forward to replace Swift.

In June, 1946, Rockefeller Foundation auditors, going over the center's books, found that it had already spent, in the form of debts incurred, the \$12,500 it was expecting from the Foundation for the second half of 1946. (Of the total of \$295,000 appropriated to the center for the period 1938 through 1948, the Foundation had paid out all but \$37,500.) The center also owed the Rosenwald Fund of Chicago \$30,000, money that was to have been used in making a film on race relations but instead had been swallowed up in general administrative costs. The American Film Center was bankrupt.

Why did the American Film Center fail? Obviously one reason was that Slesinger alienated himself from most of the best makers of documentary films by his refusal to follow their recommendation on the GEB film. (During the war he testified before a House committee that the Association of Documentary Film Producers was riddled with communists, and as a result many association members were unable to get jobs in wartime documentary production.) It also is fairly clear that the center's funds were poorly managed; in fact, there is some evidence to suggest that Slesinger knowingly misrepresented the financial position of the center for months before its dissolution.

To a considerable extent, however, the American Film Center was a casualty of the times. Although in 1938-1939 it looked as though the documentary film would become a strong force in American culture, and wartime

strengthened this belief, the expected postwar boom in the documentary never materialized. Industry put its money into hard-sell advertising instead of the soft-sell "public interest" film. Hundreds of young men trained in the motion picture by the armed forces during the war were bitterly disappointed to find no market for their skills. Those who stayed on in the service to make films for peacetime use found their assignments boring and unchallenging, and also became disillusioned.

Like the Museum of Modern Art film library, the American Film Center also faced the problem of finding circulation for films outside the commercial theaters. But whereas the museum's films had already paid for themselves many times over, so that only a minimum charge was necessary, the center had to build an audience that would in effect pay for the production of documentary films. Without a steady and plentiful supply of good films, however, the nontheatrical audience could never come into existence, nor could theater owners be persuaded to take on documentaries. This circle could have been broken only if the American Film Center, or some agency like it, had been provided with funds more nearly approaching the tens of millions of dollars which the Ford Foundation has spent in trying to build up and buttress educational television in this country.

Ironically, the large audience for the documentary which the American Film Center hoped to create has come - to television. Educational television is the closest thing to a dream come true of the American Film Center. The 82 National Educational Television stations beam programs across the country and attract an audience of over 80 million. The NET network is the most ambitious scheme of audiovisual adult education ever to exist. But it was by no means inevitable. Noncommercial television is a miracle, and will continue to be as long as it is both free and privately supported. A major



contribution to educational programing is also being made by the public affairs departments of the commercial stations. Here the original impetus came from the Federal Communications Commission, which has ruled that the stations must devote a certain portion of their programing to public affairs. Neither the old newsreel, an illustrated lecture, nor yet the classic documentary of the thirties, the public affairs documentary has many times represented commercial television at its creative best.

Since its decline directly after the war, the educational or documentary film has become more important than ever before. Many, like the Foundation's Harvest and Rice, have been made for and financed by organizations in the scientific, health, welfare, and educational fields, and by industry and government.

Serving the 16mm educational film field in this country today are two organizations that stem from the ill-fated American Film Center. The Educational Film Library Association, whose membership now includes more than 600 major institutions and organizations, was founded by the center in 1943 to fill the vacuum created by the failure of the Association of School Film Libraries two years earlier. Its director, Emily Jones, took over EFLA during the moribund days of the American Film Center. That it has become a remarkably effective and successful agency is due entirely to her single-minded energy and enthusiasm. Supported by its own membership and by project income, EFLA is a national clearinghouse for information in the audiovisual field. Its most important continuing project is evaluation of educational films, which it carries on with the aid of audiovisual experts across the country. Each spring the association runs the largest 16mm film festival in the world, the American Film Festival; Harvest and Rice have both won blue ribbons at this event.

The second survivor of the American Film Center is Film News, which has grown since its center days from a modest newsletter to a substantial magazine. Like EFLA, Film News owes little more than its birth and its name to the film center; it exists through the dedication of another spirited and devoted woman, Rohama Lee. Miss Lee acquired the files and subscriber list of the old Film News in 1947 from the basement of the RCA building, where they had been stored after the center's demise. Film News covers every aspect of the nontheatrical film field from the point of view of the consumer, and has scored a fine success both in promoting the use of films in such places as churches, national parks, and nursing and dental schools, and in acquainting readers with the development of national film units in newly independent areas of the world.

A number of distinguished people in the film field once held Rockefeller Foundation fellowships, some under the auspices of the American Film Center, others through the Museum of Modern Art. Thomas Baird, a 1937 fellow, is now in charge of distribution of United Nations films. Edward Anhalt, a 1938 fellow, made documentaries for years before becoming one of the most highly paid scriptwriters in Hollywood. Nicholas Cabell Read (1939) was remarkably successful in running a film unit, supported jointly by a number of Southern states, that made pictures on social issues; he has recently formed his own firm, Potomac Films, in Washington, D.C., and is continuing to make films in the public interest. Harry Lewis Robin, also 1939, is a successful sound recordist and composer. John B. Kuiper, a GEB fellow in 1950, is now professor and head of the Department of Motion Pictures at the University of Iowa, one of the country's outstanding university centers in the film field; he is an authority on the Russian film maker Eisenstein. Dorothy Blumenstock Jones (1950) is a leading specialist in audience research in Hollywood.



In spite of its failure, the American Film Center produced undeniably good results in the Educational Film Library, Film News, and the creative and scholarly careers it helped to launch. Add them to the remarkable effect of the Museum of Modern Art Film Library on taste and scholarship in this country, and the total result seems a more than ample return on the scant \$1 million the Foundation invested in film from 1935 to 1950.